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ABSTRACT

This guidebook provides the principal with some fundamental tools for reducing stress and preventing professional burnout. Chapter 1 offers strategies for identifying and reducing personal stress. Cognitive restructuring is advocated as an effective, permanent approach, in which the individual changes patterns of thinking about stressful situations. Some of the solutions described include acquiring needed skills, anticipating and preparing for problem situations, utilizing relaxation techniques, exercising, maintaining a reasonable workload, seeking group support, and confronting perceived stresses. Chapter 2 offers tips for identifying and reducing staff stress. The third chapter describes ways in which the principal can create a less stressful building climate through administrative style, communications, and supportive and physical environments. A relaxation tape accompanies the document. (Contains 7 references.) (LMI)

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Reducing Stress In Schools

A School Administrators' Guide to Managing Personal and Building-level Stress

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by

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Chapter 1

Identifying and Reducing Personal Stress

Introduction

During the past two decades, the public schools have come under increasing pressures from many segments of our society. While many in the education community have been criticized, the school principal has particularly borne the brunt of many of the attacks. The school principal receives criticism not only from the public, but also faces internal pressures from within the school and the school district. The middle management position of the principal makes him/her particularly visible and, therefore, vulnerable to pressure.

The principal is under pressure to deal with any number of issues facing the schools. For instance, the principal is often expected to see that test scores improve, to oversee changes in the curriculum, to take care of teacher and parent complaints, to be responsible for discipline for increasingly difficult students, to know school law, and, in general, to be responsive to everyone. Because of these many pressures, which appear to increase each year, it has been my observation that the principal has one of the most stressful jobs in the school system.

Because of this unique situation, in this book I have tried to provide the principal with some fundamental tools to assist him/her in reducing stress and perhaps, in the long run, help prevent professional burnout. The book is also intended to help the principal recognize and deal with people on his/her staff who are under high levels of stress. The last objective of the book is to suggest some strategies in developing a less stressful school atmosphere.

What Is Stress?

Basically, stress is a physiological reaction to psychological perceptions. Stress levels are specific to the person and to the situation. This means that each person appraises every environmental situation in relation to his/her perceived skills to deal effectively with the situation; how the situation affects them; and whether or not he/she perceives the situation is a threat to their well being. This threat does not have to be a threat of physical harm, but can be a threat to one's self esteem, to one's personal or professional integrity, or to one's standing among peers and/or colleagues.

The assessment of a threat to one's self, whether physical or psychological, causes the body to react defensively in order to protect itself. The resulting physiological reaction is known as the **fight or flight** phenomenon. In response to a physical threat, the body mobilizes to meet the threat. Adrenaline increases, blood is pumped faster, breathing accelerates, pupils dilate, and muscles tense in preparation to meet the perceived threat. Of course, this is nature's way of providing the body additional resources for short periods of time. When we refer to psychological stress, these same physiological changes take place. This stress, while not as intensive as when preparing for fight or flight, usually lasts for longer periods of time. Occurrences such as prolonged worrying about your job performance, work overloads, and dreading the coming of perceived stressful events are examples of situations that can cause stress symptoms. When asked to respond to prolonged periods of stress, the body begins to break down and physical symptoms are manifested.

I think I'm feeling stress

Principals and Stress

As mentioned in the introduction, being a school principal is a particularly stressful occupation. My observation is that the stress is not only due to the nature of the job, but also because of the personality types of many who seek to become principals. Most principals strive to be high achievers. Even though it is impossible to always meet the diverse expectations of the community, the school staff, and the central administration, many principals think that they must fulfill everyone's expectations in order to be successful. This places these individuals in stressful situations because the various groups they must interact with often have agendas that are in conflict with one another. Obviously a belief system that holds that you must fulfill everyone's needs and have everyone's

approval is faulty. However, I think that this belief is commonly shared by many principals. Since it is impossible to have everyone's approval and meet everyone's needs, the principal who holds these expectations is often under extreme stress.

Remember, stress is the result of a thinking process that perceives an event or series of events as threatening. Some other common examples of perceptions that cause stress with principals are listed below:

- *many believe they must always have the answers or they will lose the respect of teachers and / or parents (threat to their personal evaluation).*
- *many believe they must have control over everything that goes on in the building or they are not doing a good job (threat to their professionalism).*
- *many believe they must see that there is never dissension among staff (threat to their competence).*

Given this situation, the critical question now becomes how can the principal recognize the stress and effectively manage it?

How Do I Recognize my Own Stress?

Since stress manifests itself through physical symptoms, one must first look for the physical indications of stress. Common physical symptoms of stress are

chest pains,
high blood pressure,
hypertension,
increased heart rate,
frequent colds or flu,
insomnia,
bowel problems,
frequent headaches or stomach upsets,
muscle aches and pains not due to exercise, or
frequent recurrence of such conditions as asthma.

Such symptoms naturally occur in most people at one time or another; however, if the symptoms last for long periods of time, or happen again and again without determined medical reason, they may be due to environmental stressors.

How Can I Assess my Stress Levels?

There are several methods that can be used to determine stress levels. With a little investment of time, an individual can assess the amount of stress he/she is under and get some indication of the causes of the stress.

An easy but effective way to assess levels of stress is to chart, on an hour-by-hour basis, the amount of stress you are feeling. To get an accurate picture, the charting should be done over a 3- or 4-day period. To create a chart (see example), divide a piece of paper into one square for every waking hour. Then, set up a 5-point rating scale as follows: **(1) non stressful, (2) mildly stressful, (3) moderately stressful, (4) very stressful, (5) extremely stressful.**

In order to help you determine your stress level, at the end of each waking hour ask yourself the following questions. **"How have I felt this past hour? Am I tense? Do I have a tension headache? Is my pulse rate up? Are my muscles tight?".**

This routine takes only about 30 seconds and provides good practice in becoming more in-tune with your own body. By charting your tension levels, you accomplish two things:

- *you become more familiar with recognizing tension in your body and how increases in tension affect your body; and*
- *you are able to assess if there are any patterns to your tension level.*

When you put a 4 or 5 in the box, it is also important to jot down what has been happening. This provides an indication of what events are happening to make you tense.

For instance, if you chart your behavior for four days and every day you notice that between 1:00 p.m. and 3:00 p.m. your tension rises to a 4 or 5 level, something is happening during that period of time that causes you to become tense. With this information it is possible for you to identify the causes of your stress. Once this is accomplished, it is then possible for you to develop strategies to manage your high stress levels.

Sample:

Waking Hours

6-7 a.m.	7-8 a.m.	8-9 a.m.	9-10 a.m.
1	2	4 - Began school 2 substitutes 3 discipline problems	3
10-11 a.m.	**11-12 a.m.**	**12-1 p.m.**	**1-2 p.m.**
2	5 met with angry parents of problem student	3	2
2-3 p.m.	**3-4 p.m.**	**4-5 p.m.**	**5-6 p.m.**
2	3	4 teacher group meeting - objected to curriculum changes	3
6-7 p.m.	**7-8 p.m.**	**8-9 p.m.**	**9-10 p.m.**
2	1	1	1

How Can I Reduce my Stress?

There are a number of techniques which can help reduce stress levels. Ultimately, in order to permanently reduce stress, a person must change his/her life style. I will discuss seven techniques that I feel are the most appropriate and effective for the building administrator. They are

Cognitive Restructuring,
Skill Acquisition,
Anticipation and Preparation,
Exercise,
Maintaining Reasonable Work Loads
Group Sharing, and
Facing Perceived Stressors.

Cognitive Restructuring

The most effective way to reduce stress in your life on a permanent basis is through a process called cognitive restructuring. Simply put, **cognitive restructuring is a process of changing how you think about the events in your life.** Generally speaking, high-level stress in any individual is not the result of an event or series of events. Rather, it is a result of

- *the way the individual views how the events impact them*
- *and what skills they perceive they have to cope with them.*

In order to manage high stress levels in your life more effectively, you must begin to view potentially stressful events in a different way. Again, stress is due, not to the event, but how a person perceives that event. Different people perceive the same events in different ways.

As one example, an event that happens to many of us is the loss of a loved one. That event will affect people differently, depending not only on what the loss means to them, but also on how they perceive themselves in the wake of that loss. Some persons may feel that they cannot go on without their loved one. They feel that no one else will ever love them as much, and that they will never find anyone else to love. These persons are likely to be extremely depressed and anxious, and demonstrate symptoms of stress. Other people may objectively reason that while it is tragic that their loved one is gone, they can put their life back together and eventually find someone with whom they may have a loving relationship. While still stressful, the second group will not generally experience

the level or duration of stress that the first group experiences, because they have appraised the situation and perceive that they can handle it. While overly simplified, the points to be noted are

for the most part, what we think determines how we feel; and

people feel differently about the same events, depending on what each individual thinks of an event and how he/she perceives the event affects them.

In the preceding example, the same event--a loss of a loved one--affected two groups of people differently based on their assessment of their ability to meet new people, their self confidence, and their past experience of having good relationships.

By restructuring your perceptions of life's events, you can reduce your stress. You are in control.

EXERCISE

Assume that you will shortly have a meeting with a disgruntled parent and his/her child's teacher. You find that you are anxious because you know the parent is upset and could be very difficult in the meeting.

Your stress level may be high during the time preceding the meeting. If you are feeling stress, it may be that you are having negative thoughts about the meeting. Thoughts that the meeting could get out of control, fears that your professional competency may be questioned, or fears that your position as principal may be placed in jeopardy are examples of negative thought patterns. Such negative thought patterns will definitely increase your stress level, because these thoughts are threatening to you. The only way to change the amount of stress you are feeling is by changing the way you think about this event.

One way to do this is to take a piece of paper and divide it into two columns. Label column one as Current Thoughts and column two as Counter Thoughts. Write down your current thoughts in column one and then develop parallel counter thoughts that are more positive and could be equally valid (see example on following page).

Current Thoughts	Counter Thoughts
-I am anxious these parents might be very angry in the meeting and that I might lose control of the meeting and of myself.	-Even though the parents coming to the meeting may be angry, if I am calm, reasonable, and resolute in the meeting, there is no reason why the meeting should get out of control. To help myself remain calm during the situation, I will take deep breaths and constantly remind myself to stay calm and not to get angry.
-If I lose control of the meeting and if the parents make a scene, my staff will think I am unable to handle difficult parents.	-If I'm able to control the meeting, then the parents should not create a scene. Even if I lose some measure of control, my staff have dealt with angry parents before and know what I am up against. I don't think they would judge me negatively on the basis of one meeting.
-Since I must mediate the meeting between the parents and the teacher, my show of support to either side may come into question.	-Before the meeting, I will discuss what I can and cannot support with the teacher. If the teacher and I have any disagreement, we can work it out prior to the meeting. The teacher then understands that my aim is to keep the situation calm and to reach a compromise if possible.
-If we are not able to reach a satisfactory conclusion at the meeting, the parents may go over my head to the central office or to the school board. This may cause my capabilities as a principal to come into question.	-Even if a satisfactory conclusion has not been reached by the end of the meeting and the parents decide to go over my head to the central office or the school board, this situation is not disastrous. If necessary I can inform my supervisor prior to the meeting of the problems that I foresee, and let him/her know immediately after the meeting what the outcomes were. By informing the central office of what took place in the meeting, what we proposed, and how we prepared for the meeting, this will be viewed as professionalism on my part rather than my actions being viewed as incompetence.
-I find it difficult to deal with angry people and a situation like that is upsetting to me.	-No one likes to deal with angry people. However, from time to time in my job, I will be forced to take a part in such situations. I will use this meeting to hone my skills in dealing with difficult individuals.
	-In summary, if I am prepared for the meeting, have met with the staff, involved and we have decided upon what we can and cannot do; if I remain calm, reasonable, in control; and if I do my best to reach a satisfactory conclusion, I have done all that I can to deal with the problem. I should not feel anxious about having to deal with the situation.

What I have tried to point out with this example, is that there are a number of ways to think about a given situation. Unfortunately, once we start to think in a negative, self-defeating manner, those negative thoughts seem to gather momentum and sometimes overwhelm us. The result is that we experience extreme stress. Obviously, when this happens you have blown the situation completely out of proportion. Only by objectively viewing that situation will you be able to see that the problem is not nearly as overwhelming as you made it appear.

Cognitive restructuring can be used in any situation in which you tend to get worried, angry, or tense. For example, if you are caught in a traffic jam and are late to an appointment, you can find yourself becoming extremely tense. The results of being late because of an incident that you cannot control often becomes more formidable than it should. In such instances you will notice that your body starts to show signs of stress--perhaps through muscle pain, sweating palms, rapid heart beat, or increased irritability. These physiological responses are due to your perception of the event. Once this negative cycle starts, you must recognize it and stop it as quickly as possible. In such a situation you should realize that

- *you can't make the traffic go any faster, and it does not improve circumstances to get upset about a situation over which you have no control,*
- *everyone has been caught in traffic jams before and will understand your lateness,*
- *you should turn on the radio and take deep breaths, relax, and*
- *you should use this opportunity to think about some of the other things that you have not had time to ponder. (You will also find that you can relieve stressful situations by turning your thoughts elsewhere.)*

This process obviously takes practice. It takes practice to learn to recognize your stress symptoms. It takes practice to focus on your current thoughts, and it takes practice to learn to use counter thoughts. While it is best to begin by writing your thoughts down on paper, after using the counter thought strategy for a while, you should be able to do it mentally.

When identifying your thoughts, remember to be honest. Without honesty, the current thought/counter thought process will not work.

Some considerations in using the counter thought process:

- **Have you ever been in a similar situation before?** What was the outcome? How did you handle things in that situation? Have you shown skills to handle similar situations in the past?

- **Avoid the use of absolutes (always, never, etc.).** There seldom are situations where the consequences are absolute.
- **As objectively as you can, try to assess the seriousness of the situation.** Is this situation catastrophic? Does it really warrant a great deal of worry and pain? Realistically, what is the worst thing that could happen from this situation?
- **If you were advising someone else in the same situation, what advice would you give them?**
- **If someone else were to make a mistake in the same situation, would you think badly of them?** If not, then why would they think badly of you?

To reemphasize the current thought/counter thought process, let's try another example.

EXERCISE

The faculty advisory committee informs you that a group of teachers in the building feel that you do not support them in dealing with disciplinary problems. They feel that you are insensitive to their efforts in handling both the students and the parents. The teachers would like to schedule a staff meeting to discuss this matter next week. You agree.

After hearing the problems, you find yourself thinking more and more of the coming meeting and you feel yourself getting angry and frustrated. You start to have problems sleeping at night because you are thinking of the upcoming meeting. In addition, you have had headaches quite often this week. Noticing the stress, when you stopped by the local supermarket, you took your blood pressure on one of their machines and found the pressure was up from the last time it was taken. These are probably indications that you are experiencing the effects of stress linked to your thinking process about the coming meeting with the teachers. Using the current thought/counter thought process, it is time to examine your thoughts concerning this meeting.

The obvious goal in this case, as in all cases, is to see whether or not you are overreacting and thinking in a self-defeating manner. After taking some time to think about the meeting and examine your thought processes, you find that your current thoughts may look like the following.

Current Thoughts

- *Teachers are always complaining about something. In this case, they want me to handle all their problems for them. They are not looking at the possibility that they might have had something to do with that student being in trouble. As soon as something goes wrong, they dump it in my lap. These teachers do not want to deal with any student that behaves differently. They are not very tolerant or understanding. They do not understand how difficult my job is. They think that all I have to do is to deal with problems which they do not want to deal with.*
- *The unhappy ones didn't even have the consideration to talk to me personally. Rather, they involved the whole staff through the faculty advisory committee.*
- *They obviously do not trust me if they feel they cannot talk to me. They don't seem to appreciate the job I do or all the things I do to make their jobs easier.*
- *If the staff feels this way, others probably question my competency. Perhaps, everyone feels I'm not doing my job. If word of this gets back to the central office, my competence will come into question with supervisors. They will see me as not being able to handle staff and problems in my school. This may even put my job in jeopardy. They must question my job competence.*

This thought process indicates that it is possible to begin a negative cycle and end up in an uncontrolled, unrealistic pattern. What in reality was a simple conflict between the principal and a few teachers, was mentally transferred into a job-threatening situation by the principal. Unfortunately, the scenario presented here is not unusual. If you think about it, we have all experienced this type of negative thought cycle during our lives, resulting in our bodies manifesting stress symptoms.

As mentioned earlier, threats to our professional integrity, as well as our professional standing, cause our bodies to respond in a protective mode. Our body does not differentiate between physical and psychological stress. One way to ease the stress is to use the counter thought process. The counter thoughts might appear as follows:

Counter Thoughts

- *Wait a minute. I think maybe I'm getting ahead of myself. So far, all that the teachers have asked for is a review of the discipline policy and how I'm carrying it out. It is a fact that some of my actions have been questioned; however, I shouldn't feel at this point that I'm under attack.*
- *This may be a good chance to get feedback from the staff on how they think discipline in the school can be improved. It will also give me a good opportunity to outline some of my feelings about discipline in the classroom.*
- *This might be a good chance for me to get some suggestions on how to improve my own disciplinary skills. If my skills improve, I should get increased support from my staff.*
- *Just because there are some questions from the staff, does not mean they do not support me as a principal or as a person. I should not expect people to always agree with me. When I disagree with other people, it doesn't necessarily mean that I feel they are incompetent or that I don't like them. The faculty advisory committee was set up to provide an outlet to teachers to objectively deal with problems. The fact that they use this vehicle does not mean that they do not trust me as a person.*
- *I must remember to view this meeting as a chance to improve the discipline in the school, my skills, and my relationship with the staff. If I remain calm and reasonable during the meeting, I may be able to use this opportunity to achieve some of my own goals. If I start to get angry, I must remember to calm myself down and focus on the issues at hand. I must remember not to get defensive. If I approach this meeting positively, perhaps I can give the faculty a better understanding of the problems that I face with my job in carrying out disciplinary action.*
- *It is possible to develop positive outcomes through compromise, and still maintain my integrity and have reasonable control over situations.*
- *I have had meetings similar to this in the past and, even though I was nervous before the meeting, they have, for the most part, been positive. There should be no reason why this meeting should be any different.*
- *My supervisors know that every building principal must deal with teachers. They understand that teachers and principals do not always agree. They will also understand that one sign of a good principal is being able to deal with conflict resolution in positive ways. If we are able to come up with more positive discipline resolutions, ultimately we will have a better school and I will be viewed as a more competent administrator.*

Even though these counter statements still reflect a situation which is potentially stressful, they approach the problem in a more positive, less stressful, and realistic way. Each event can be viewed in more than one way. The counter statements in this scenario reflect an attitude that you are viewing the event as a challenge rather than a threat. Therefore, the stress symptoms are negated.

Summary

Remember that **cognitive restructuring is probably the most effective, permanent approach to dealing with stress.** The cognitive restructuring approach requires that people under stress change their patterns of thinking about stressful situations. In order to do this, they must

- ***identify the events causing the stress and***
- ***recognize the negative thought patterns that are causing the body to react in stressful ways.***

In order to reduce the stress levels, you must be able to reorganize these thought patterns in a more positive way. One of the most effective methods of doing this is by outlining your current thought process and developing a more positive counter thought process. Initially this is probably best accomplished by writing out your current thoughts and counter thoughts. Eventually you will develop the skills to do this mentally. As a reminder, here are some of the considerations to use in developing a current thought/counter thought process:

- **Try to be honest in reviewing your thought patterns.** Only by doing this will you be able to use cognitive restructuring effectively.
- **Try to immediately identify those thought processes which go beyond rational bounds.**
- **Try not to think in absolute terms (e.g., always, never, etc.).**
- **Remember, there are at least two ways of thinking about every situation.**
- **Use self-talk techniques for remaining calm and in control of stressful situations.** Calm, rational approaches utilized during stressful situations usually diffuse anger and frustration. When you begin to feel angry, remind yourself to remain calm. Tell yourself to take a deep breath and remain focused.
- **Develop a realistic worst-case scenario in thinking about the situation.** In most instances, even at its most extreme, the event is probably not as bad as your current thought patterns are projecting.
- **Try to think about what advice you would give others who are in your present situation.** This allows you to view your own predicament in a much less threatening way.

- **Realize that even if people disagree with you, it does not mean that they do not respect or like you.**
- **Develop relaxation techniques (to be discussed later) when anticipating and participating in stressful situations.**

Skill Acquisition

A factor that often impacts the level of stress felt by individuals is whether or not they think they have the skills necessary to deal with a given situation. A good example is a situation where one is expected to give a presentation to a group. For many people, giving a presentation to a large group is stress producing. However, to others who have had some training and experience in making presentations to groups, this event is not very stressful. Obviously, the difference between the two is

- *having or not having a background in making presentations, and*
- *the degree to which the presenter feels in command of the content of the presentation.*

Using the example presented in the cognitive restructuring section, suppose you are going to have to mediate in a meeting between an angry parent and a teacher. If you have had a background in conflict resolution and have successfully experienced a number of these types of meetings before, the likelihood is that your stress level over this meeting will be minimal.

As an example of a situation of a technical nature, suppose you were asked to make a budgetary presentation to the school board. If you had a good background in school budgeting and you were well versed in the budget issues on this particular agenda, chances are you would not perceive the situation as threatening and would not display symptoms of stress. However, if you felt that your technical skills in the area of budgeting were not strong and/or that members of the school board were better versed than you, the anxiety level could be quite high.

The point is that you can reduce stress through skill acquisition and/or content organization and preparation. If there are areas that you think you need improvement in order to feel professionally more successful, you should make an effort to acquire those skills. There are a number of ways to acquire additional skills such as taking courses, consulting with knowledgeable people, or acquiring knowledge through professional reading. The important factor is that by becoming more skilled in areas where you feel inadequate, you thereby develop more confidence in your ability to effectively manage what have in the past been problem situations, and you reduce the levels of stress.

Anticipation and Preparation

It is also important to note that anticipation of problem situations and preparation for those situations can lead to stress reduction. One should use available resources to prepare for stressful events. Using the example of the angry parent, you can make sure that you are well prepared for that meeting by understanding as much as you can about the child, his situation, the teacher and his/her interaction with the child, and the history of the parent's involvement. By reducing the possibility that surprises will confront you during the meeting, you will generally feel far less stressed about that situation.

It is important that you prepare for those events that cause stress. By gathering information and planning for those identified stressful situations, you feel prepared, and therefore confident, that you can achieve a successful outcome.

Relaxation Techniques

When stress builds to a high level, it manifests itself in muscular tension. Muscular tension in turn causes such physical symptoms as stomach upsets and headaches. **A good way to combat muscle tension, and therefore reduce the physical symptoms, is through deep muscle relaxation.**

Initially, it takes approximately 20 to 25 minutes to implement the muscle relaxation techniques. During these exercises, each muscle group is individually tensed and then relaxed. This procedure releases the tension in the body and can return body functions, such as heart rate and blood pressure, to normal

levels. **You should use the tape accompanying this document to begin relaxation techniques.**

In order to get the maximum use from the relaxation exercises, they should be practiced daily until the practitioner feels comfortable in exercising each muscle group. After using the technique for awhile, you should be able to use the muscle relaxation exercises in any environment, such as sitting at your desk, in your car, or in a meeting.

Concentrated slow, deep breathing, which increases the oxygen flow to the blood, can help you gain control of your body's response to stress. When you find yourself losing control, stop and take a deep breath, then concentrate on breathing slowly. Deep breathing can be helpful when entering tense encounters where you need to be relaxed in order to perform well. By increasing the oxygen in your blood, you will be able to think more clearly and slow down your physical reactions to stress.

Exercise

Routine exercise programs are also helpful in reducing tension. When done three or four times per week, physical activities such as jogging, walking, aerobics, weight-lifting, handball, or any other physically demanding exercise can be most helpful. However, be sure to check with your doctor before embarking on an exercise program so that he/she can help find the exercise program that is best for you.

There are several reasons that physical activity is effective. First, when your muscles are fatigued they cannot be tense. Second, if you strengthen your cardiovascular system, it becomes more difficult for stress to adversely affect that system. Third, when one's energies and thoughts are directed away from stressful day-to-day occurrences and to other diversions, such as exercise, one manages stress more effectively.

Maintain Reasonable Work Loads

It is often difficult for a principal to say "no". Regardless of their personal work load, for many principals there seem to be a constant stream of new tasks that they are expected to undertake. **It is difficult for anyone to maintain acceptable levels of stress when they are faced with jobs too numerous and too complex to possibly accomplish with any degree of proficiency.**

In addition, it has also been my experience that those principals who take on each task with dedication are those who are constantly asked to do additional jobs. This is because the bureaucracy does not have limit-setting capacity. The bureaucracy does not know (or many times is not concerned about) what your personal limits are because it has jobs to get done and it will use those willing and able to do them. **Therefore, in order to control your personal stress levels--and eventually, of course, your own job performance--you must understand and protect your own personal limits.**

Often principals feel that they are dealing with a double-edged sword. If they take on too much, they can not do a good job because of time constraints; thus, their competency is questioned. If principals say "no" to new assignments, they will be viewed as uncooperative and difficult to work with. This may pose a roadblock to their careers. Both edges of this sword can be extremely stress-producing.

The best approach in dealing with this problem is to learn **how** to say "no". You must learn to say "no" in a positive way which expresses your concern for the task and your desire to help. For instance, when saying "no" to a supervisor, you can point out that your present commitments are consuming all your available time and you cannot take on a new task without neglecting something. However, tell your supervisor that you would be willing to help her/him problem-solve another way to get the task accomplished. This approach lets her/him know that you have limits, but that you are also a concerned employee who is willing to help find a different way to accomplish the task.

Another positive way to approach a request to do a job is to explain that you already have tasks with deadlines and the new task would make it impossible to achieve all of your commitments. However, you would be willing to take on the new assignment if other jobs could be postponed, rescheduled to meet work loads, or transferred to someone else. Again you are saying that you have limits but are willing to help if you can find some relief for your work schedule.

By saying "no" in these ways, you are letting the administration, faculty group, parents, or whomever, know that you are concerned and a "team player", but

that you have limits beyond which you cannot operate effectively. By saying "no" in a positive way, you provide yourself the best alternative to difficult situations.

Remember, continually adding new tasks and/or responsibilities to your already overbooked schedule will not serve you or the job well. **You must learn how to set reasonable limits for yourself and find positive ways to operate within those limits.** This concept is an essential element in being an effective building administrator.

Group Sharing

I have also found that group support among principals is an essential part of managing individual stress. **When principals share their thoughts and feelings with a small group (no more than eight to ten people) on a regular basis (at least once every other month) the stress levels of the group members usually decline.**

When problems occur in school buildings, many principals feel that they are alone in experiencing these problems and that somehow their inadequacies are responsible for the problem. Principals are often reluctant to reveal that they are experiencing problems for fear that their colleagues will think poorly of them. Some principals have related to me that other principals always seem to "be on top of everything". They say that they never hear other principals talk about such issues as personnel problems, and they wonder how their colleagues have managed to create harmony in their buildings.

By bringing together a group of principals to meet on a regular basis for the purpose of sharing school-related problems, each member can see that all the group members share similar problems. In addition, the group can serve as a resource for one another in implementing solutions.

I feel that group sharing among colleagues is essential to stress reduction in middle management. If you are able to share your perceptions of your job and have a way to obtain insight into the ways others perceive the same situation, it gives you an opportunity, not only to get things off your chest, but also to find how your perceptions compare with those of your peers. You have the opportunities to discover new ways to perceive and solve problems.

Since the group's sharing process provides you with feedback, you can test the validity of your situational perceptions. Since changing perceptions through cognitive restructuring is an important part of relieving stress, the peer group can be extremely valuable. However, one should be cautioned that unless the feedback is honest, the process will not be helpful. Many times in sharing your

perceptions, or when a friend shares his/her perceptions, there is a tendency to agree with your peer in order to be supportive. However, in order to be helpful, it is important to share your perception of the described situation even if your perceptions are different. By sharing a different way of thinking about the described event, you generally are being helpful to the other person by providing an alternative viewpoint. This process is essential in reducing stress. You must learn that there are alternative ways of viewing any given situation. This is what cognitive restructuring is all about, and why group sharing is essential.

Facing Perceived Stress

I feel I should add a note on confronting those situations that you perceive to cause stress. As we will discuss in Chapter 2, communications of all sorts are often poor and messages are easily misinterpreted. I find many individuals cause themselves a great deal of undue stress because they misinterpret either written, verbal or non-verbal forms of communication and fail to ask for clarification. This unwillingness to confront these perceived stressful situations is often a major source of stress.

If you are having stress because of your interpretation of some event, then it is best to confront that situation in a positive way. For instance, you might ask someone who failed to speak to you if there is any problem. You might ask your supervisor why you were not notified of a job opening in which you were interested. You might ask for clarification of a memo that you felt was reprimanding in its tone.

The point is that many times the stress that we create through our perceptions can be eased quickly by calmly and positively confronting the source of that stress. **It is usually better to take positive action than to allow stress to build because of an unwillingness to confront that situation.**

Summary

To summarize, it is important to note the following points:

- **The position of school principal can be very stressful because of the many, often conflicting, internal and external expectations and demands.**
- **Prolonged stress can cause potentially critical physical damage to the body.**
- **Since stress is the result of perceived personal threat, it varies from individual to individual.**
- **Stress can be recognized by its physical symptoms, such as muscle tension, frequent headaches, gastro-intestinal problems, increased blood pressure, etc.**
- **The most effective way to reduce stress levels on a permanent basis is by learning cognitive restructuring.**
- **Other ways of reducing stress include**
  - **anticipating situations that might be stressful and planning different ways of thinking about and/or handling these situations,**
  - **acquiring skills in areas in which an individual feels inadequate,**
  - **setting limits on work loads,**
  - **using deep muscle relaxation techniques,**
  - **developing a program of physical exercise**
  - **participating in peer sharing groups on a regular basis, and**
  - **facing perceived stress situations as they happen.**

Chapter 2

Identifying and Reducing Staff Stress

Introduction

Stress is a universal phenomenon. It affects everyone. Not only do principals need to maintain low stress levels in themselves to be effective, but they must be concerned because stress adversely affects the members of the staff and thus the school in general. High stress levels can often cause teachers to perform poorly in the classroom, to have problems getting along with colleagues, and/or to become a poor role model for students and co-workers. Often principals perceive these staff members as problem employees, rather than recognizing that they are functioning poorly because of the amount of stress affecting them. If a principal can recognize stress in staff members and assist them in reducing that level of stress, the entire school environment can be positively changed.

As previously mentioned, I believe that people with high levels of stress tend to create a stressful environment for those around them. A classroom teacher who is under a great deal of stress can cause stress in his/her students and co-workers. It is obviously important for many reasons that the principal learn how to help staff with stress-related problems.

How Can I Tell when a Teacher Is Stressed?

There are a number of observable signs that help identify staff members who are stressed. One common indication is an **excessive number of absences** due to colds, flu, and other minor illnesses or injuries. Another sign of high stress is a **noticeable change in behavior** in a staff member. For instance, he/she may become irritable, have angry outbursts, yell at students, complain excessively, or be unable to get along with colleagues. A third manifesta-

tion of stress is when a teacher becomes **obsessed with the behavior of a student or with the behavior of the entire class.** Comments to listen for are such things as,

"I can't stand this student's (class') behavior."

"I shouldn't have to put up with such behavior."

"I hate going into that classroom."

"I haven't been able to sleep at nights thinking of Johnny."

"That student (class) makes me so angry, I feel like exploding."

"That student (class) is misbehaving just to upset me."

Statements like these are often indications that the teacher is feeling a threat to his/her teaching abilities and classroom management skills. Perceiving that threat, the teacher begins to experience stress and react defensively.

How Can the Principal Help?

The next question is, "What can the principal do to help the teacher reduce his/her stress level?" I have identified several techniques that I think can be helpful. In effect, they are much the same as discussed in personal stress reduction. They include

helping staff recognize their own stress,

helping staff use self-talk reminders,

helping staff use cognitive restructuring,

providing opportunities for staff to share experiences with others,

helping staff acquire additional skills, utilize relaxation techniques, and implement exercise routines, and

helping staff deal with stressors outside the school environment.

Help Staff Recognize their Own Stress

The first thing that you can do is to help a staff member recognize his/her stress by bringing the behaviors that manifest stress to the staff member's attention. Often, people are not aware of how stress affects them, and they are not aware of their own responses to stressful situations.

When you observe a teacher demonstrating signs of high levels of stress, I suggest that you make an appointment to speak to the teacher privately and, in a very supportive way, describe the behavioral changes you have noticed which you feel are indications of stress. Be very specific! For example, you might say, *"Mr. Smith, I know that you have always been an excellent teacher and dealt with many problem students in the past; however, I have noticed that something is different this year. I've observed you have been yelling (irritated, angry) a lot more of the time. I have heard you comment that you hate coming to school (or you hate third hour, or you get a severe headache by noon every day). I wonder if there is something bothering you, and if I might be able to help?"* The purpose of your approach is to get the teacher to pinpoint the cause of his stress, and most importantly, how he perceives the situation.

If the teacher says that the class this year is impossible and that he hasn't been able to control their behavior (or Billy's behavior is impossible and he can't control him), ask him to express his thoughts about the situation and his perceptions of the causes of the situation as specifically as possible.

Remember, people's distress is based on their perceptions of a situation. For example, if teachers view a class (student) as a threat to themselves, they are going to feel very anxious and probably will exhibit stress symptoms and react defensively. If teachers perceive that their colleagues feel that they are not performing well, it threatens their professional image. This threat is just as stressful as a threat of physical harm, and the body responses are the same.

Once the stress is acknowledged by the teacher, there are several techniques which can help to reduce his/her stress.

Self-talk Reminders

One method you can use with the teacher is to have him/her write down calming self-talk reminders on an index card to keep with him/her in the classroom as a tool to use when he/she begins to feel anxious. By reminding oneself through calming self-talk statements, most teachers can help themselves keep personal anxiety levels down, and are better able to pursue steps to deal with difficult situations. If the teacher remains extremely anxious, it often becomes impossible to utilize existing skills to defuse difficult situations. Hence, the teacher

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resorts to defensive measures such as yelling, physical responses, throwing kids out of class, or similar actions.

Examples of statements which might be used are

1. **Just relax, and take three deep breaths to help me remain calm.**
2. **This situation can be improved. Don't blow it out of proportion.**
3. **I have the skills to handle this situation, but I must remain calm in order to use them.**
4. **Don't take any of this personally, even if the student(s) get personal with names or remarks. Most kids have their own problems which often trigger these actions.**

Cognitive Restructuring

Probably the most effective way you can help the teacher is by assisting him/her in applying cognitive restructuring techniques in order to develop long-term skills in reducing stress.

For instance, if the teacher states that she thinks that a student's behavior is beyond her control and that she can't stand having that student in class one more day, it is important for the principal to be supportive. However, the principal may point out that while the student is very disruptive, the teacher has effectively handled disruptive students in the past (if, in fact, they have). The point is to get the teacher to re-focus on the fact that this situation is not hopeless and that she is capable of handling it. It is important for the teacher to know that you do not think she is doing a poor job because of this problem (if, in fact, this is what you think).

You might also point out that other teachers have had similar problems with this student or class (if they have). Let the teacher know that she is not the only one who has experienced difficulties. All teachers have students that get to them. The teacher also needs to know that you will help her/him, in a non-judgmental way, improve her/his skills in handling extremely disruptive students.

Just as you might do in reducing personal stress, help the teacher develop a cognitive restructuring process by using the current thought/counter thought process. Using the disruptive class as an example, the current thought/counter thought process might go as follows:

Current Thoughts	Counter Thoughts
-This class' behavior is driving me crazy. I can't stand being in here.	-Yes, this class is not behaving as I would like them to behave, but I have had behavior problems before and coped with them. This is bad but not catastrophic. I can handle it; however, I must remain calm.
-I've never had a class this bad.	-I've had unruly classes before. Maybe not quite as unruly as this class, but pretty bad and I handled it.
-These kids are hooligans. They don't belong in school.	-Some of these kids are out of control, but I have several options. I can try other techniques; I can get support from the principal; I can refer them for evaluation.
-I shouldn't have to put up with this.	-All teachers have problem students or classes at one time or another. I can handle this.
-The whole faculty is talking about me for having such an out-of-control classroom.	-Some faculty members might wonder what is going on, but the teacher who had these students previously knows what I am experiencing and has been supportive.
-The principal thinks I can't control my own classroom and will give me a bad evaluation.	-I'll call the principal down and have her sit in the class for a few days so she will know what I am experiencing. Maybe she will have some suggestions.

After you have helped the teacher conduct this exercise in restructuring her thinking, have her try it on her own and then show you the results. After people practice this technique a few times on paper, they develop the skill to do it mentally. As previously mentioned, you are trying to help the teacher see that there are a number of positive ways to view situations that are causing them stress.

Help Develop a Plan to Deal with Recurring Anxiety-producing Situations

The principal should help the teacher to anticipate the problems that cause extreme anxiety. For example, if the teacher knows that almost every time a particular student has any free or unstructured time, the student becomes totally disruptive, help the teacher work on a plan to occupy the student and/or provide him/her with another task when he/she has finished his/her work. There are a number of proven tactics that may be utilized with specific types of problem students.

Many teachers know exactly when problems will occur but do not develop plans to handle them. They treat each recurring incident as if it were a first-time event. You can be helpful by asking the teacher to define the problem. If it is anticipated, then you can help the teacher develop a plan to deal with the problem and therefore alleviate his/her anxiety.

Assist teachers in creating a plan that specifies what measures they can use if they become overwhelmed by anxiety. For example, if teachers start to feel extremely anxious and out of control, a plan may be made to relieve them for a few minutes until they can get themselves together. Another plan may be to remove the student(s) (if that is the cause of anxiety) for a few minutes until things calm down. Each of these options should be done in such a way that teachers do not feel badly about exercising them. The action is taken so that teachers have time to regain their composure, and to prepare to implement other agreed upon strategies.

A principal can be extremely helpful to his/her staff by being supportive in helping them to re-think anxiety-provoking situations and outlining a step-by-step process for the staff members to follow if they need help.

Provide an Opportunity to Share Experiences

Provide time within the school year when faculty members can get together and share how they think and feel about typical classroom experiences. This provides an opportunity to hear that others experience difficulties in the classroom. Often when a teacher has a problem, they feel that they alone are having that problem. Group sharing also allows an individual teacher to see how others perceive difficult situations. For example, if one teacher says that she is frustrated because Johnny won't do any classwork and she feels that this is because Johnny doesn't like her, others may observe that they have had similar experiences with Johnny. Someone may also have other information that will allow the frustrated teacher to de-personalize the situation.

I also recommend that the principal explore the concept of Teacher Assistance Teams at the building level. Teacher Assistance Teams, made up of a small group of selected staff members, are designed to help individual teachers problem-solve approaches to use with individual students and/or class problems. When armed with proven interventions and/or appropriate strategies and/or material resources, these teams can become a positive force in helping staff deal with stressful classroom situations. (Teacher Assistance Teams are also known by other terms such as Child-Study Teams, Student Review Teams and Care and Concern Teams. These should not be confused with special education teams.)

Other Stress-reduction Techniques

Other techniques outlined in Chapter 1 applicable to personal stress reduction are obviously also appropriate to help a staff member experiencing stress.

- **Skill Acquisition**-If in your discussions with your staff member you find that the problem (or part of the problem) is they perceive that they are trying to deal with tasks that they do not have the skills to accomplish, you can help develop a plan for them to acquire those skills. Again, any number of options are available, from recommended readings to in-service or college courses. The point is if the staff member is able to acquire skills in areas that they feel inadequate, their stress levels will decrease dramatically.
- **Relaxation Techniques**-The relaxation techniques covered in Chapter 1 can be recommended to the staff member. If you have become comfortable in developing the relaxation response, you can help the staff member start to use that technique. **Loan them your tape!**
- **Exercise**-You may recommend they use regular exercise as a means to reduce stress. In fact, I have known a number of principals who have organized physical activities in their schools to encourage their staff to develop a regular program of exercise.

Outside Stressors

When encountering a staff member who is experiencing high levels of stress, the principal must realize that the primary cause of that stress may be non-school-related. Problems with marriage, finances, family, health, and any number of other personal concerns, can cause a staff member to become stressed and render them less than effective at work. The stress-reduction techniques in this publication can be applied in dealing with any stressful situation, and the principal may want to suggest them to the staff member.

However, there are times when referral to an outside professional is warranted. Sometimes, to suggest counseling might increase his/her stress level because he/she might believe that you think they are "crazy". It is imperative that, before you make any suggestions, you should first ask them how you may be of help. This allows them to tell you at what level they want your help. If the person is unsure how you can help, then you can feel more comfortable in making some recommendations. When making suggestions, it is best to phrase them like, "Have you considered getting help from an outside person?". This approach provides the opportunity for you and the teacher to become partners in solving the problem. After posing these questions, ask the person what he/she thinks about your suggestions. This will help to clarify any misperceptions he/she may have concerning your intentions.

The school district where I am employed has a "wellness program" where personal counseling and other services, such as professional financial counseling, can be accessed by staff. These services can be extremely helpful. I have observed instances where, because staff members have begun to better manage finances and/or personal problems, large amounts of stress have been relieved in their lives.

The point is that there are a number of times when professional services are appropriate and, as a principal, you should be willing to encourage, and if necessary recommend, the use of a professional service to a staff member who can benefit from them. However, remember that such advice should be rendered at an appropriate time in a supportive, rather than judgmental, manner.

Summary

- **Staff members who are under high levels of stress not only are not able to perform their jobs as productively as possible, but often create stressful conditions for other staff and students who interact with them.**
- **There are ways to recognize excessive stress in staff.** Signs include an excessive number of absences due to health problems and noticeable changes in behavior (such as increased irritability).
- **The principal's first action should be to help a staff member recognize his/her own stress.**
- **The principal can work with the staff member to reduce stress by developing plans to use appropriate stress reduction techniques such as**
  - **self-talk reminders,**
  - **cognitive restructuring,**
  - **developing plans to deal with recurring provoking anxiety situations,**
  - **skill acquisition,**
  - **use of relaxation techniques,**
  - **exercise programs, and**
  - **opportunities to share experiences with others.**
- **The principal should realize that there are many personal factors outside the school environment that can cause stress in his/her staff members.** Stress reduction techniques can be used with any stressful situation. However, there are times when the best service the principal can provide is helping the staff member recognize the need for professional help.

Chapter 3

Creating a Less Stressful Building Climate

Introduction

Recently a great deal of attention has been focused on the school climate and its impact on learning. Most educators agree that, although there are many facets involved in learning, the overall educational environment is critical to student achievement.

Because of the amount of work that has been done in this area, there are a number of good resources that a school administrator can review to identify the many components that comprise school climate and to obtain concrete suggestions of how to make improvements in their building.

My purpose here is to mention a few (but by no means all) issues that I believe the principal can address to make a positive impact on the school climate. The ultimate goal is to produce a less stressful, and more productive, workplace for staff and students. Even though some of these suggestions are rather obvious, I believe they are often lost in the pressure and hurry of today's schools. If you as a principal can be mindful and responsive to some of these, I am sure you can reduce the stress levels in your building.

For the purpose of presenting these ideas in some organized fashion, I have divided them into four segments:

Administrative Style
Communications
Supportive Environment
Physical Environment.

Administrative Style

The building principal sets the tone for the entire staff by the administrative style that he/she employs on a day-by-day basis. Administrative style encompasses a broad spectrum of behaviors and actions, such as

- *tense to very relaxed approach,*
- *authoritarian to democratic administrative style,*

- *decisive to vacillating decision-making process,*
- *regimented to open interpretation of building rules, and*
- *distant to very personal involvement with students and staff.*

One should not assume either end of an administrative style is best. For instance, a building principal who remains distant to students and staff is generally ineffective. However, the principal who is overly involved with students and staff may very well also be ineffective.

The following are some suggestions I believe affect administrative style and can reduce overall tension in a building:

- **As a building principal you should always be aware of your personal level of stress, and make every attempt to keep those stress levels at a minimum.** I believe that principals who are under stress tend to create stress in those around them. Thus, they significantly contribute to developing a more stressful building climate. Conversely, the principal who keeps his/her stress level low tends to respond calmly and rationally to stressful situations, and thus helps defuse stress in those around them. Therefore, the first step toward the creation of a less stressful climate in your building should be to ensure that your personal stress level is at a minimum.
- **The building principal should use a practical approach in interpreting and enforcing rules and regulations.** Rules and regulations are necessary in our society for obvious reasons. However, the principal should first assume that, as professionals, the school staff will use discretion and good judgement with rules, regulations, policies, and procedures. Therefore, a long and often confusing set of rules and procedures is often counterproductive. By creating an atmosphere of trust and responsibility, a principal generally creates a less stressful building climate. This is because staff will feel that their professionalism and integrity are appreciated. When there are staff who abuse this responsibility, they should be handled by the principal individually. Too often principals simply remove trust and responsibility from the entire staff in an effort to deal with the problem created by a few abusers. This approach often leads responsible staff members to think that the principal does not trust them. They may become confused and angry because they do not understand why the rules have suddenly been changed for them when they have acted responsibly. When they appraise their situation, it may seem that their professionalism is being threatened, thus increasing their stress levels.
- **The building principal should maintain consistency in decision-making**. One of the most stress-producing situations within a building is when personnel are surprised by decisions made by a building principal which are inconsistent from one time to another.

Although it is impossible to always make decisions that are totally consistent, it is important for your staff to feel secure in how you will react in a given situation.

- **It is also important to make decisions within a reasonable period of time.** If a staff member asks for a decision, and that decision cannot be made at that time, it is important to let him/her know when it will be made.
- **I feel that a building principal should try to maintain a sense of humor and to encourage humor in his/her building.** I firmly agree with some recent research which maintains that when a sense of humor exists in a workplace, it is more productive than workplaces where there is little or no humor. In general, I think that humor is a great tool for reducing stress. Laugh!
- **The principal should be sensitive to the overall climate of the building.** If a portion of the faculty is showing signs of being overwhelmed or stressed, the principal should look at the environment to determine what factor or factors are causing the problem. Be particularly aware of the individual work load (committees, etc.) of the staff. Be careful not to overburden any one teacher -- some teachers just cannot say no. Remember, stress is based on individual perceptions and, therefore, you must pay attention to how your staff members perceive situations. It is often effective to encourage people to share their perceptions on a regular basis through a written survey or in a faculty meeting designed to discuss their thoughts about building climate. It is also extremely important for you to set up a forum where staff members have the opportunity to share problems with each other. This should happen on a regular basis.
- **Related to the previous suggestion, you should encourage input on important matters that affect your school.** You should provide the opportunity for staff to share their feelings on issues such as building policies and procedures, curriculum, inservice, and student disciplinary policies. When you sincerely involve staff in the decision-making process, you usually solicit their support and participation in the maintenance of those decisions. When staff has input into policies, they feel that they have more control over their work situations. Recent research shows that those people who feel they have little or no control over their work environment suffer the most from stress.
- **It is important for the principal to let staff know why policy decisions are made.** Remember, stress is created by thought patterns. By letting those affected by a decision know exactly why a decision was made, you greatly reduce the chance that a staff member will misinterpret the reason behind a decision.

Summary

- **Try to remain calm in your approach, taking care to keep your own stress levels at a minimum.**
- **Treat your staff as professionals with the ability to make sound judgments and deal with problem personnel directly as exceptions.**
- **Seek input from staff on important issues that affect them.** Listen to their ideas and, as far as possible, incorporate their input into your decisions. Let people know why important decisions were made.
- **Be sensitive to building stress levels and seek to understand what factors are responsible for increases in stress.**
- **Provide a means for staff members to share school problems.**

Maintain Good Communications

Faulty communications can be a major cause of stress. When communications are poor, the perceptions of the staff can be inaccurate. Such situations foster rumors, which can create a great deal of stress at the building level.

As a principal, one of the best ways to create a less stressful environment is to develop an open, responsive communications system. The following are some ideas on developing and maintaining an effective communication system.

- **You should be very careful that both written and oral communications be as clear, specific, and free of ambiguities as possible.** Research shows that when people are uncertain or confused about a direction or message, they tend to give a negative connotation when interpreting the ambiguities.
- **When possible, you should give reasons for directions.** If staff members understand why they are being directed to do something, it removes the feeling that the direction is personal.

- An instance of a directive that leaves a teacher in the dark might read:

  "Mr. Jones, please provide an academic progress report on Mary Smith to the office by 3:00 p.m. today."

- A better message might read:

  "Mary Smith's mother is meeting with me at 3:45 today to discuss Mary's failing grades in a number of her classes. In order to help me prepare for the meeting, I need a report from you on her current academic progress and any ideas you have to help her improve. Mrs. Smith has asked to meet with me alone however, I'll be available to talk to you before and/or after the meeting. I'm sorry for the short notice. Thanks for your help."

  This second message gives more specific reasons for the meeting, why the teacher was not included, and tells the teacher that you are willing to meet with him/her to discuss the outcome. In short, while it takes more time initially, it makes it clear to staff members that you are not conspiring against them with the parent.

- **Make yourself available and receptive to staff communications.** When people feel that their boss is unavailable and/or unapproachable, they generally maintain higher stress levels. Many times being available and receptive to staff questions will clear up misperceptions quickly. In other instances, listening to problems and helping shape solutions can defuse stress.
- **Never penalize a staff member for seeking help from you.** Try to make it a positive experience. Being approachable means that you are receptive to staff input and that you strive to create a positive problem-solving atmosphere.
- **Never try to maintain an image of infallibility with your staff.** Acknowledge mistakes that you make in order for the staff to realize that you understand it is not a catastrophe to "mess-up".
- **When addressing a problem that a staff member is experiencing, be as clear, direct, and positive as possible.** When you can, emphasize the positive attributes of the staff member, while clearly isolating and discussing the problem. In this way, you will give people

the message that you value them as a person but you need to address a specific problem. Involve the staff member in posing solutions to the problem and convey that you are not angry with them, but be clear on your expectations of how they need to change.

- **When receiving negative feedback from your staff, try to react in a manner you expect of them:**
  - remain calm and try not to be defensive
  - try not to take it personally
  - keep it in perspective
  - problem solve
  - reschedule the meeting if you are becoming angry and defensive

Develop a Supportive Environment

One of the greatest differences that I have found between building climates is that some seem to foster cooperative, supportive atmospheres and some do not. Non-supportive buildings are often characterized by fractionalized staffs, competitiveness between staff members, and a generally negative environment.

The principal has a great deal to do with setting the tone for creating a more humanistic, supportive atmosphere. There are obviously many ways to foster a supportive building climate. A few of my suggestions are as follows:

- **Establish a policy of saying "thank you".** In written and verbal form, let people in your building know that you appreciate the things they do. Although this suggestion might seem inconsequential, it is, in fact, very important. People who receive acknowledgment for their efforts feel appreciated, think more positively about themselves and their environment, and tend to model that behavior with others. One teacher who worked in two different buildings as part of her assignment, recently told me that she felt that the working environment in one of the buildings was much better than the other. She felt this because in one building her extra efforts were acknowledged by "thank you's", but in the other building, no matter how much she did, her efforts were never acknowledged. When people's deeds are not acknowledged, they tend to think that they are neither appreciated nor liked by the principal. Again, it is the perception that produces stress.
- **Involve staff in cooperative planning and problem-solving, and integrate those group decisions into your curriculum and policies.** Cooperative staff ventures tend to make individuals feel a part of a group and, by having an impact on decision-making, fosters an interest in seeing that those decisions are successfully implemented. Remember, when people have input into policies that affect them, they feel that they have more control over their working conditions. Restating

a previous point, recent research has shown that those most affected by stress in the workplace are those who feel as if they have no control over their environment.

- **Foster a caring attitude.** It is important that you exhibit a caring attitude toward staff both through words and actions. If the boss is able to demonstrate that the people who work for him/her are important, and that it does matter what happens to them, the chances are that same attitude will be shared between staff members. This is especially true when a staff member has "messed up" and is feeling awful and thinking that he/she is the only one in the world who could have made such a mistake. Caring and supportive words at this time are very important. It is a time when you might share mistakes you have made in the past and point out that the results were not devastating.
- **Learn how to involve staff in roles of responsibility.** You must learn to delegate authority to others and help them to be successful in their efforts to fulfill those roles. Remember, you can't do it all.

Physical Environment

There is no question that one's physical surroundings impact both the psychological and physical comfort levels. The more pleasing and comfortable the surroundings, the more likely that individuals operating in those confines will be relaxed and less stressed.

The dimensions of those surroundings include space, light, temperature, sound, color, furnishings, cleanliness, efficiency, and function. As a building principal, it is impossible to take any facility and make it fit all demands of each staff member. However, by being aware of the various environmental elements in your building and being sensitive to the effects that those elements have upon your staff, a principal can often optimize the setting to produce the least stressful physical environment possible.

With these notions in mind, a few suggestions for creating a positive physical environment are as follows:

- **Attempt to provide adequate space for your staff to perform their jobs.** Having adequate space of your own is a very important issue. There is a sense of security and permanence that comes with having your own space; not having adequate space available can be very stressful to building personnel. Adequate space for everyone is not always available in a building; therefore, it is important to communicate with those adversely affected by inadequate space to let them know what you are doing to alleviate the problems and when they may look for a solution.
- **If possible, provide teachers with a comfortable lounge.** It is important to create a cheerful area with comfortable furniture where a teacher can relax.
- **As far as possible, attend to other matters that are important to staff on a day-to-day basis.** For instance, it is important to provide staff easy access to a secure, regular place to park their cars; a telephone; coffee and tea, pop machines, and other refreshments.
- **Areas that are constantly too hot or too cold are distressing to those functioning in that environment.** Some of the complaints I've heard from teachers concern temperature control. Although different individuals will vary in their preferences on temperature, it is often a problem that can at least be improved if given attention.
- **When physical problems arise in a building, make sure that repairs are made promptly.** Unavoidable delays should be explained to staff members.

Summary

Physical environment does impact individual and collective stress levels. When a principal does not pay attention to physical environment problems, staff members often think that the principal doesn't care about them. Obviously these perceptions often produce stress.

Remember, stress surfaces when people appraise their environment as being threatening. If people perceive that you do not value them enough to make their workplace comfortable, their sense of well being will be threatened. If you can't provide for adequate space and comfortable surroundings, you must explain why and what steps you are taking to try to remedy the problem. By explaining the situation, you do not allow individual staff members to make up their own reasons as to why you are not helping them.

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